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Venice and Its Location

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Urbanization, the process of an urban area’s physical growth, is usually triggered by a city’s cultural, religious, political, or economic significance. Often, such significance is determined by the city’s geographical location which relates to important aspects like access to water routes and other cities. Venice serves as a great example of a city that was heavily influenced by its location. The challenges it faced as a city on the water, along with the advantages it had as a bridge between the west and east, led to a peculiar urban and architectural development. Its rapid growth and the monuments built during the Byzantine Empire remarkably illustrate such impacts of its location.

Venice, located in northeast Italy, is composed of 118 islands which are separated by canals and linked by bridges. The city was originally founded in the seventh century, by the mainland Romans who were fleeing barbarian invasions. Initially, the settlement was rather unsystematically scattered throughout the archipelago on which it grew. However, the city gradually became centralized around Rivo Alto, which became its permanent capital when the evangelist Saint Mark was adopted as the city’s patron saint. The Arsenal, the Rialto market, the San Marco square, and the cathedral in Olivolo arose as the main driving forces of early Venetian urban development.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Venice’s urbanization was further intensified through its commercial links with the Byzantine Empire. During the reign of Alexius I Comnenus, Venice aided the Byzantine Empire against the Normans. In gratitude for its aid, the emperor granted Venice unrestricted trade throughout his empire in 1082. The trading privilege given through elimination of custom dues initiated Venice’s growth as a trade power. Its increasing significance as a port city and domination of maritime commerce between Western and Eastern Europe led to a rapid urbanization. As a result, by the end of the thirteenth century, Venice was one of the largest metropolises in Europe. It was divided into six urban districts and contained about one hundred parishes and monastic churches, as the city plan from the Chronologia Magna shows.

As a result of its connection with the Byzantine Empire, Venetian architecture also evolved. When Venice began to take advantage of trading privileges with the Byzantine Empire, it turned eastward for cultural inspiration. Architecture was heavily influenced by this movement. As Howard notes, it was indeed in the Byzantine period that “the foundations of Venetian architecture evolved.”

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architecture were laid, both literally and conceptually. The Byzantine style persisted in Venetian churches and palaces for centuries.

An outstanding example of Veneto-Byzantine building is the ducal chapel of San Marco. The church was originally built as a temporary Doge’s Palace in 828, when the relics of Saint Mark had arrived. However, due to the damages from the great fire in 976, the church went through significant repairs and reconstructions during the reigns of three different doges in the eleventh century. Consequently, many renovations made to San Marco happened to stem from characteristics of contemporary Byzantine churches. San Marco resembles Justinian’s Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople, built in 330 and demolished in 1456, in particular. The two churches were similar in their cruciform plan, domes forming Greek cross, interior vaults, Byzantine arches, and other decorative details.

Yet, many of the Byzantine features were transformed so that they suited functions of a Venetian church. For example, San Marco has a larger central dome and an extended nave space than the Church of the Holy Apostles, and thus has more space. It also contains a secluded presbytery at the east end and the tomb of Saint Mark under the chancel. Such deviations from the traditional Byzantine architectural style were made in order to suit the Venetian liturgy and provide a more appropriate setting for its processions. Moreover, the look of this monument was not solely “Byzantine,” since the building was largely designed by Italian craftsmen, as well. Italian influences are especially visible in its mosaic works, which were directed by Michele Giambono, a leading Venetian painter and mosaicist.

Nevertheless, the Byzantine influences are clear among such blend between the West and the East.

Architectural influences of the Byzantine Empire are also depicted in early Veneto-Byzantine palaces. The earliest palaces that are substantially intact today include the Fondaco dei

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6 The Architectural History of Venice, 7.
Turchi (13th century), Ca’ Loredan and Ca’ Farsetti (13th century). The Fondaco dei Turchi, although it is the largest and best known among the three palaces, was the most drastically altered, as well. Yet, its architecture essentially shows a Venetian interpretation of the Byzantine style, especially with its tall, stilted semicircular arch. Ca’ Loredan and Ca’ Farsetti, two adjacent houses on the Riva del Carbon, also show Byzantine influences with their characteristic stilted arches. Moreover, other Byzantine aspects such as broad, refined colonnades and loggia are present. Both houses were also planned to form a ‘T,’ another distinctive feature of Veneto-Byzantine houses, with a long, deep hallway behind the front loggia running back into the house.11

Nevertheless, just as in the churches, the Venetian palaces were distinctive in certain ways. Palaces in Venice had different functions compared to those in the Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire. Since Venetian nobilities earned their living from seafaring and trade, their palaces served not only as residences but also as commercial headquarters. Thus, the three early palace facades were built with two-story arcades, which consisted of a ground-floor portico used for loading and unloading.12

The deviations in the Venetian palaces also stemmed from Venice’s unique physical environment. The main water entrances of the palaces had a wider archway for convenience. The openness of their facades provided as much light as possible, which was especially important in Venice since the buildings were closely spaced due to the shortage of land.13

The physical environment of Venice brought unusual problems and features in its urban structure. The shortage of land led to high density housing which increased the risk of rapid spread of fires. The high land values made it cheaper to build an extra floor than to extend the site of a building. Thus, layers were later added on top of many houses and palaces. Such buildings included Ca’ Loredan and Ca’ Farsetti, which have four stories today but were originally two-story buildings. Moreover, Venice is crisscrossed by canals, whereas most medieval European cities had a clear demarcation between land and water. This led to the development of a very distinctive transportation system which made use of gondolas, sandolis,14 and other watercraft.15 The layout of the city also triggered problems of traffic congestion on canals, which had to be controlled by strict government legislation. Another obvious problem the city faced because of its environment was flooding, which still remains the biggest, hardest, challenge in Venice today.16

The city’s location on water also initiated development of two important building types that supported the daily workings of Venice. The first were underground cisterns. They were built to collect rainwater, since Venice lacked natural supplies of fresh water. Every campi, a small open space, and private courtyard of large houses had cisterns accessible through well-heads. These well-heads, often made in marble and beautifully carved, became a distinctive feature of the Venetian townscape.17 The second were

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13 The Architectural History of Venice, 36.
14 Sandolis refer to small flat-bottomed boats which were used to carry goods.
bridges. The most momentous bridge in Venice, the Ponte di Rialto, was constructed across the
Grand Canal. It was situated at the lowest bridging point of the main waterway, which was the
most significant geographical landmark. The original Ponte di Rialto and other early bridges
were made of wood. The choice of timber as the primary building material was also affected by
the city’s geography. The Venetians had little access to other materials and had to minimize the load on the city’s unstable subsoil. As the city grew, they used bricks and stones, which were more permanent and became equally accessible.

The hostile physical environment has also encouraged conservation in Venice. As McAndrew notes in his journal, Venice has “changed less than any other great living city.” The canals and the framework of streets have prevented the intrusion of automobiles, which have drastically transformed many other cities. Also, its outstanding buildings and monuments, which attract tourists and artists, have encouraged the Italian government to conserve the city. In addition to the national government, UNESCO has also shown dedication for coordinating preservation of Venice. Indeed, this does not indicate that the city has not transformed and grown. However, most buildings in Venice were remodeled by updating their details, not by completely rebuilding. Thus, the essentials that developed throughout history have not been altered. Consequently, Venice shows surprisingly little change in its landscape and its historic monuments.

Venice’s physical location has been a key factor in its process of urbanization, specifically through trading advantages and environmental challenges. Connections with the Byzantine Empire helped the city prosper as a commercial center and develop unique architecture that blended both traditional Western and Eastern styles. Challenges caused by its location had great impacts on urban planning, led to the emergence of atypical building typologies, and encouraged conservation. Due to the careful preservation of exceptional buildings and beautiful scenery, Venice continues to thrive today. The “city of water” demonstrates how a city’s location can define and influence its urbanization.

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18 The Architectural History of Venice, 45.
21 Roberto Cessi, Denis E. Cosgrove, and John Foot, "Venice (Italy)," Encyclopedia - Britannica Online Encyclopedia, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/625298/Venice
22 “Venice as It Was, Is, and Must Be,” 245.
Bibliography


